

Case Report

Carbon copy deaths: Carbon monoxide gas chamber

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Abstract

The news media can exert a powerful influence over suicidal behaviour. It has been observed that like-minded individuals are able to preplan a group suicide method using modern communication technology in the form of websites and online chatrooms and mobile phone texting.

A case of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning is presented to illustrate the recent phenomenon of cyber suicides by suffocation from a burning barbecue (charcoal burner) in 'gas chamber' conversions. Although barbecues (BBQ) are very popular in Britain and widely available, there have been relatively few reported cases of copycat deaths from CO gas suffocation.

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1. Introduction

In the author's 30 years experience in forensic pathology there have been on many occasions copycat deaths facilitated by much publicised high profile suicide. An editorial about suicide methods stimulated by dramatic media portrayal provides strong evidence for the potentially negative impact that media coverage has on the suicidal behaviour in susceptible people.^{1,2}

The news media can exert a powerful influence over suicidal behaviour.² Recently, in the aftermath of televised mobile phone video images of a judicial hanging of a former president for crimes against humanity in the Middle East, two young children in two different continents experienced accidental self-hanging trying to mimic the event.³ In Hong Kong some several years ago a rapid rise in the incidence of suicide by burning charcoal followed romanticised description of the suicide method of a woman who

lighted a charcoal fire in her cramped apartment to produce the suffocating CO (carbon monoxide) gas.^{2,4}

The present case using a barbecue (BBQ) in a sealed bathroom occurred a week before a British newspaper report of the suicide of a former soldier in this country some months earlier after he lit four disposable BBQs simultaneously in his sealed bathroom.⁵ In a cyber suicide pact two people met on the internet and planned online their deaths from CO poisoning by burning a tray of BBQ charcoal in a car in London.^{6–9} An e-newspaper reported BBQ related dyadic deaths of a young mother and her son exposed to CO fumes from lighted disposable BBQ in a bedroom.¹⁰ There is another report of accidental BBQ related CO deaths in Britain involving a couple who brought a lit disposable BBQ inside their camping tent.¹¹

It is an interesting observation that although BBQs are very popular in Britain and widely available, only a few incidents of carbon poisoning from charcoal burners have been reported.

Campaigners in Britain have called for a ban on websites that promote suicide amid fears that Britain is in danger of embracing a similar 'suicide cult'.¹² An 'alarming

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escalation' in suicide by using burning charcoal has been documented in Hong Kong.²

2. Case report

CM was a young woman of Oriental ethnicity residing alone in the flat of her exboyfriend while he was away on holiday. She was discovered by him on his return. She was found fully clothed in a dry bathtub in the bathroom. There was an extinguished BBQ in the bathroom which had been converted into a gas chamber (Fig. 1). The whole flat had been sealed airtight from the inside with duct tape, including the wash basin and bathtub plug hole and overflow, and the shower head (Figs. 2 and 3). The smoke alarm in the bathroom had been disabled by masking over with a plastic bag (Fig. 4). A suicide note dated a fortnight

ago was found in the flat. There was no significant past medical or mental health history.

3. Postmortem examination

The body was that of a well nourished slim built young woman 1.61 m in height. She showed moderately advanced postmortem decomposition. Hypostasis was visibly pink. There were no significant marks of violence.

The internal examination showed general congestion in the major organ with postmortem changes. The blood did not show obvious cherry red hue and it was not in a particularly fluid state.

A sample of blood was available for toxicology and it revealed a lethal carbon monoxide concentration [HbCO 61%].



Fig. 1. Overview of extinguished charcoal BBQ inside the sealed bathroom.



Fig. 2. Duct tape sealed bathroom interior.



Fig. 3. Duct tape sealed showerhead.



Fig. 4. Disabled bathroom smoke alarm.

The death was attributed to inhalation of irrespirable CO gas produced by the lighted BBQ.

The coroner at the inquest into her death returned a verdict of suicide. The suicide note and the considerably time consuming planned preparations satisfied judicial criteria beyond reasonable doubt of the intent to take her own life. There was no direct evidence of an internet link in her death but on a balance of probability the plethora of information on BBQ method of suicide available was more likely an influencing factor.

4. Discussion

It is well known that victims tend to use readily available and convenient suicide methods. For example, those with ready access to firearms are more likely to use a gun to commit suicide.

In the past, deaths from accidental or suicidal exposure to CO were common before natural gas was substituted for coal gas as domestic fuel supply and charcoal burners were used to provide warmth indoors or in enclosed spaces with inefficient ventilation.¹³ The usual source of CO production are car exhaust fumes, faulty ventilated heating systems, household burners, gas fires, smoking fires, BBQ and coal braziers, and in rare circumstances hepatic metabolism of the methylene chloride after inhalation of paint stripper.¹⁴

In recent years, with the advent of motor vehicles with catalytic converters and lead free fuel the author has noticed a dramatic fall in CO suicides from car exhaust fumes. However, modern communication technology in the form of websites and online chatrooms and mobile phone texting has permitted a network of like-minded individuals to preplan a method of group suicide. It is noteworthy that traditional suicide notes may not be found at these scenes and investigators should search and download e-suicide notes from personal computers and mobile phone records.¹⁵

It has been known for over a decade that young people in the Far East tend to participate in group suicide by inhaling irrespirable fire fumes by lighting a charcoal BBQ inside motor vehicles or confined compartment converted into gas chambers. Suicide pacts made online over the internet have been in existence since the late 1990s and there are recent reports of cyber suicide cults in Japan engaged in group suicide by CO poisoning from charcoal stoves.⁸ This phenomenon tends to occur in cycles as the news reports of group suicides spark off copycat incidents.⁸ Cyber suicide clubs are rife but not unique to Japan and have spread to Taiwan, South Korea and China and have reached the USA where an invitation to e-death at a suicide party was posted on a website.^{8,16,17}

A copycat suicide is one type of suicide amongst others such as suicide pacts, cult suicide, mass suicide, ritual suicide, cyber or internet suicide, euthanasia and dyadic or murder-suicide deaths.¹⁸

The toxicology of CO as a silent killer and clinico-pathophysiology of CO deaths are well documented historically.^{14,19–22} In a confined space, elevated atmospheric carbon dioxide and reduced oxygen could potentiate the effect of low toxic carbon monoxide concentration.¹⁹

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